New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 18 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 17, 1955

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?"

New York Post

October 14, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

On How to Succeed in Hollywood

By combining certain features of "Faust" and "Once in a Lifetime" in a rather frenzied amalgamation, George Axelrod has devised an odd comedy which he calls "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" The author of "The Seven Year Itch" has a way with a comic line, as well as a keen eye for the satirical possibilities of those durable targets, Hollywood and sex, and his new play, which opened last night at the Belasco Theater, has a great deal of hilarity in it, although there is the quality of the private joke about it that could bother later audiences.

Mr. Axelrod has taken as the theme of his scornful mockery of California glamor an idea that will arouse little dissent from the actors, authors and producers in Hollywood. It is that a Hollywood agent is the devil's representative on earth. His central figure is a fellow he calls Irving LaSalle, who has supernatural powers and can accomplish anything for the client who will sell him his soul. Taking control of a callow little fan-magazine writer, he is able to turn him into the successful lover of the screen's chief sex girl and win him an Oscar for writing.

Defense of Integrity

Don't think, however, that Mr. Axelrod is altogether a cynic. He can also be romantic about playwrights. The diabolical Irving LaSalle can provide for a dramatist having trouble with his second play the script that is going to win the Pulitzer Prize for 1958, complete with the rewritten versions for the out-of-town tryouts. But he reckons without the basic integrity of even an author who has sold himself to Hollywood. I think the comedy is considerably more fun before it begins to come to the defense of the lofty principles of the writing craft.

Indeed, the new play at its best can be very funny. Mine is the report of a reviewer who didn't go along with the general critical and popular enthusiasm for "The Seven Year Itch," and I can say that I found more amusement in the onslaughts of "Rock Hunter." When Mr. Axelrod is observing and mocking the nonsense about glamor girls, Oscars, Hollywood luxury, fake Hollywood sentimentality, and the stuff that goes into cinema scripts, he is usually immensely entertaining in a rowdy and raucous fashion.

Who Are They?

But there is that quality of in-the-family humor. Do you know the actual identity of the agent upon whom Mr. Axelrod's diabolical representative is presumably based? Did you ever hear of Charlie Feldman? Do you know about Charlie Lederer and his antics when playing tennis with experts? It isn't completely necessary that you have an awareness of such living personages to enjoy the play, but it will certainly help. And you may be a little lost if you don't. You may even find yourself noting that the comedy is fairly thin after its first act.

It is splendidly acted. Martin Gabel, an unfailing actor, has just the right combination of the comic and the sinister to be the mysterious Irving LaSalle. Orson Bean is both amusing and sympathetic as the fan-magazine hick who keeps selling 10 percent of his soul. Walter Matthau is excellent as the playwright whose integrity keeps him from the Pulitzer Prize. As for Jayne Mansfield, who plays the fatuous glamor girl, she seems perfect, and it can't be entirely type-casting that does it. As a compilation of jokes about the twin institutions of Hollywood and sex, the evening has its points.

"WILL SUCCESS SPOIL ROCK HUNTER?"

Comedy by George Axelrod; staged by Mr. Axelrod; settings by Oliver Smith; lighting by Peggy Clark; presented by Jule Styne at the Belasco Theatre, October 13, 1955. The cast:

Rita Marlowe...Jayne Mansfield
Masseur.....Lew Gallo
George MacCauley..Orson Bean
Michael Freeman..Walter Matthau
Irving LaSalle....Martin Gabel
Harry Kaye.....Harry Clark
A Secretary.....Carol Grace
Bronk Brannigan.....
William Thourlby
Bellman.....David Sheiner
A Swimmer.....Tina Louise
A Chauffeur.....Michael Tolan

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

October 14, 1955

'Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter' A Sexy and Amusing Film Satire

By JOHN CHAPMAN

George Axelrod, the bright young man who wrote "The Seven Year Itch," has written a new comedy with the deliberately goofy title of "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" The play was given a production at the Belasco Theatre last evening, and, like its title, it is deliberately goofy. It also is quite a lot of fun, particularly when Orson Bean, a Milquetoast type, is tossing William Thourlby, a brawny football star, all over the stage in a demonstration of judo. This is Thourlby's Broadway debut and I don't know yet if he can act—but boy, can he fall!

Axelrod's comedy is about various kinds of show business, mostly the movies, and it is broadly satirical as it deals with types like Marilyn Monroe and Sam Goldwyn. It will not replace the Kaufman-Hart play, "Once in a Lifetime," as the classic satire on filmdom, but it should not be shrugged off as a minor effort. It has a great many crisply humorous lines, and it is excellently played by Jayne Mansfield, Orson Bean, Walter Matthau, Martin Gabel and Harry Clark as the principals.

That Old Devil Again

The comedy also is the umpteenth version of the Faust legend—the newest one since "Damn Yankees." Gabel, in the guise of a literary agent who can do anything for 10%, is the devil's advocate—and Axelrod might just as handily have called his play "Getting Goethe's Garter."

The curtain rises on Miss Mansfield, who is ash-blonde, bosomy and behind-y, as she is being given a rubdown by a gentleman masseur. In comes the timid Mr. Bean to interview her for a fan magazine, for she is a big thing in the movies, like Miss Monroe. Bean's only literary effort to date has been another fanmag piece called "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" about an actor named Hunter.

A Weeping Act

Somehow, this literary gent, Gabel, silk-smooth and eel-slippery, appears. For various cuts of 10% each, he makes Bean Miss Mansfield's lover and the producer of her pictures, including one called "The Saint Joan Story." He bemuses and befuddles a hard-headed old film tycoon (Mr. Clark), who weeps real tears when he wants to gain something. Clark's performance is a gem.

Somehow, also, there comes into the plot Mr. Matthau, a one-hit playwright who succumbs to the lure of Hollywood. After two years of doing nothing but eat grapes and drink gin and orange juice outside his cabin on the grounds of the Beverly Hills Hotel, Matthau bitterly describes himself as a playwrote. "I wrote a play two years ago," he explains.

These and other characters have been stirred into a comedy which is frequently witty in its critical comments on the stage and films, but whose story line is rather desperate. Miss Mansfield is splendid as a sexy but typically dumb broad, and Bean's playing of the young man who captures her is excellent. He is Harry Leon Wilson's Merton of the Movies all over again—and is, therefore, a little late. Matthau's performance as the playwright is a model of crisp directness, and Gabel has made an easy transition from a predatory art dealer in "Reclining Figure" to the part of a ten-percenter. There are three nice sets by Oliver Smith.

The New York Times
October 14, 1955

Theatre: Axelrod's Second Comedy

'Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?' Bows

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOW that "The Seven Year Itch" is out of the way, George Axelrod has gone on to his second comedy, "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?", which opened at the Belasco last evening.

As his successful playwright says in the first act, "The second play is always the most difficult." Since Mr. Axelrod offers this line, in addition to a number of others about the hazards of successful playwriting, we can hardly help observing that we know what he means. "W. S. S. R. H.?" (he can't expect us to repeat the full title) lacks the momentum, logic and continuity of the "Itch."

•

But that does not finish the matter. For Mr. Axelrod is a funny writer who has another good central idea and a knack for writing hilarious dialogue. He begins with the notion of lampooning the American goddess of love, a platinum-pated movie siren with the wavy contours of Marilyn Monroe. Jayne Mansfield plays that part with commendable abandon.

Orson Bean, the worried Yankee comic, plays the part of an obscure, incompetent journalist who comes to write a maudlin interview with her. It is Mr. Axelrod's notion to blast Orson Bean out of his senses by having the blonde fall in love with him. This little piece of hocus-pocus is arranged through a fabulous Hollywood agent, evidently the devil, but certainly Martin Gabel, who plays the part with unctuous flamboyance on the stage.

•

All this makes for a breezy first act. And then Mr. Axelrod goes on to use his slapstick on all the follies of Hollywood, fantasticating the industry as he goes along. There are a number of pretty funny scenes. There is a burlesque of the fulsome oratory of the "Oscar" awards in which Harry Clark, playing the part of a deeply moved Hollywood producer, manages to shed tears. There is a neatly satirical scene in which an experienced agent instructs an inexperienced writer how to arrange a "cute scene" for the first meeting of boy and girl. Like other successful writers, Mr. Axelrod has an amusingly iconoclastic attitude toward the formulas that are invariably successful in the industry.

•

Although the lines and the situations of "W. S. S. R. H.?" are loudly comic, the play as a whole seems to change pace and direction, and never rushes straight on to an explosive climax. In the third act, Mr. Axelrod draws a moral conclusion about a playwright's professional integrity. It is heartening, but it does not seem to have much bearing on the goddess of love who charges the first act with so much electricity. Mr. Axelrod seems to have changed trains somewhere along the line.

He has served as his own director, and that may not have helped him much. For another director might have had a sufficiently objective point of view about the material to pull it into shape and give it a unified impression. The amusingly ostentatious production by Oliver Smith is all right.

The actors are all right. Mr. Bean's strangled enthusiasm is very funny, indeed. Mr. Gabel's spacious style of speaking grandiloquent lines is funny, too. As the successful playwright ("a playwrote," he calls himself), Walter Matthau is as sardonically amusing as usual. William Thourlby does something wonderful and enjoyable with the part of an amorous athlete. And Carol Grace is also entertaining as a sleak Hollywood secretary eager to take down the script of a masterpiece.

A first-rate satirical intelligence is at work in Mr. Axelrod's play. He has a nice sense of the spurious, and the audience has a lot to laugh at. But "W. S. S. R. H.?" is so diffuse that the audience laughs at individual scenes rather than at the play as a whole. As Mr. Axelrod candidly points out, a successful author's second play is the most difficult.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 14, 1955

THEATER

'Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter'

By WALTER F. KERR

TOWARD the end of the new satirical comedy at the Belasco, Walter Matthau sits sprawled on a Hollywood chaise longue, sun-deck variety, with a healthy wallop of gin in his orange-juice, floodlighted trees rustling gently around him, a shape in a bathing suit strolling near by, and five thousand a week rolling in regularly. He is playing a successful playwright. Everything is in his favor. But all he can tap out, as he slouches forward over a chromium-plated typewriter, is "Act One, Scene One."

• • •

The moment—funny in its own right—struck me as sharply symptomatic of George Axelrod's shiny new jest. Everything is in favor of "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" Right off the bat, it has the most engaging title to be scrawled on a comedy in at least a couple of seasons. It has more than that. It has Mr. Axelrod's own antic, off-beat, shrewdly in-the-know sense of humor to keep the quips smart and the characters hep. It has a target area of vast proportions to be worked over: success in the theater, blondes in Hollywood, agents anywhere.

But Mr. Axelrod seems to me to be still in the process of writing "Act One, Scene One." Not that he hasn't dreamed up a dozen zany devices to help keep a slightly screwball, slightly message-laden frolic on the move. There is the business of turning a timid nonentity (Orson Bean) into a millionaire, a masher, and a muscle-man at a moment's notice. There is the obvious but still substantial fun to be got out of putting Joan of Arc's armor on a platinum kewpie-doll (Jayne Mansfield) and plunging into a west-coast story conference conducted by a medium-grade moron (Harry Clark).

There are, further, endless jokes—many of them good ones—to be made about success-dizzy people who are privileged to call Hemingway "papa," wear London-made shoes with twenty-seven stitches to the square inch, and hustle off to Santa Monica to make love on wet sand. (It is the considered opinion of a redheaded secretary that, no matter what anybody says, it simply can't be done.)

Yet the gags are just gags, each of them spinning so long as its own momentum holds out, and then tumbling quietly into the corner of what seems an empty room. Mr. Axelrod's Christmas-tree trimmings don't find any handy branches to latch onto, don't gradually 'firm up'—as they probably say in the trade. That some sort of structural shape is intended is clear enough: Mr. Axelrod thinks that success eats away a man's integrity and talent in tiny little pieces. But his illustration is random: some of the gaudy folk are revue-sketch caricatures, some are fragments of unexpected fantasy, some are solid enough to put down their "vodka martoonis" and speak a moral. The ride is a fast one, but the landscape blurs.

• • •

My best guess about the cause of all this scattered shot is that the author has momentarily fallen victim to a kind of theatrical inbreeding. He is wise in the ways of the profession; he knows what it is for a writer to be "hot." He seems also, for the time being, to be at the mercy of his special interest and his special atmosphere.

He is much more concerned with squeezing the juice out of shoptalk—how Hollywood sets about having its lovers 'meet cute,' how Charlie Lederer or Charlie Feldman are going to react to a given situation—than he is about pegging his lively reference onto some reasonably general, reasonably recognizable human foible. The world of success, it says here, is a narrow and exclusive one; the humor Mr. Axelrod finds in it tends to be narrow and exclusive, too.

The company does nicely by its director-author. Orson Bean's appealing fidgets are just right for the overawed lad who hits the top at a single bound, and his management of a telephone conversation with an obsequious bank president is delightful improvisation. Walter Matthau's non-writing writer—he describes himself as a "playwrote"—is easy, pleasantly cynical, and appallingly plausible. Martin Gabel is excellent as a sleek and deadly agent from the underworld. Harry Clark is a conventional funny producer of "long, thin movies for long, thin screens," and Jayne Mansfield hunches her shoulders and undulates everything else in reasonable approximation of some one who shall be nameless.

I think, in a way, that success has spoiled "Rock Hunter." The conversation is good, but the life is lazy.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 14, 1955

'Rock Hunter' Has Successful Moments

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" was a wonderful idea for a comedy.

The new one at the Belasco has occasional moments as funny as the whole thing should have been.

But it is a jerky piece, up and down like a scenic railway and too spasmodic to ever get rolling.

"Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" must have been autobiographical in its inspiration. George Axelrod, who wrote it, had a one-in-a-million success with "Seven-Year Itch."

Two-Writer Plot.

Now he is perusing the effects of a jackpot on a writer. In fact on two writers. One is a self-styled "playwrote," basking in sun and dollars and producing nothing in Hollywood.

The other is a fan magazine reporter, who for no good reason is pacted by the devil in the guise of a writer's agent. He wins an M. Monroe-type blonde and many other favors, each at the price of 10 percent of his soul, payable to the agent.

In the end he surrenders his final 10th to get out of it all. He is rescued by the successful dramatist, who has learned that he can save himself by clinging to his original honest ambition.

The funniest sequence of the play is a hoked-up enactment of an imaginary Oscar award when the devil-agent imitates the hero, presenting the statuette to his producer, who tearfully accepts it.

Several Faults.

But "Rock Hunter" has several major faults. A lot of its talk concerns the inside of show business, so inside as to be incomprehensible to most people.

Old legends used to give people three wishes and still needed ingenuity to avoid monotony. "Rock" gives the hero 10 times at bat. You count them on your fingers.

The humor is stronger in situation than in lines. Over and over there is a fine setup for a laugh then no witty line to topple it over.

Too often an ordinary fact about picture people is served up as a joke when it may be outlandish, but is familiar past tickling you.

A Heroic Job.

Orson Bean is the fan magazine writer whose one successful interview gives the play its title. He does a heroic job of sustaining the shy surprise of a single situation, played many different ways. The role takes courage and ingenuity, and gets it.

Martin Gabel is excellent as the agent who is also satan. He plays it behind a thin veil of pomposity and an insolent manner of mysticism that is a wonderful satire on ingenious fakirs. Equally clever is Harry Clark's Hollywood producer.

Walter Mathau does a fine job on the rich writer. His pains of success are hardly common ones, but he makes the penman understandable.

Jayne Mansfield is the thinly disguised Monroe item, and a lovely bundle she is.

Journal American

October 14, 1955

Comedy Pace A Bit Uneven

Axelrod Play Starts With Series Of Cliches, Picks Up in 2d Act

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE TITLE OF THE NEW GEORGE AXELROD COMEDY which opened at the Belasco Theatre last night is, "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" This is in the tradition of crazy names he goes for: "Seven Year Itch" and "Phffft," and so everybody was wondering if success had spoiled George, Axelrod.

At first I thought it had. He gets off into a series of cliche introductions to thinly veiled caricatures of Marilyn Monroe, a Hollywood agent, Mr. Axelrod himself, and a film producer. Much of this was pedestrian and only occasionally hilarious.

It didn't seem that the humor was coming out of true situations or that the people were going anywhere for any reasons beyond the fact that Mr. Axelrod had to get them there or he wouldn't have a play.

But the second act was much livelier—the characters assumed some shape and the situations improved. At least the laughs were frequent and full-throated.

This pace proceeded with reasonable consistence until the middle of the third act, at which time it seemed to me the whole thing came apart. From the maddest farce it suddenly turned to an attempt to pull all the loose ends together with a sentimental scene between two men. And then, of course, it wouldn't end.

All this is said with the full knowledge that the author can and does write many a joke; that the show is produced with elegance and an intimate feeling for the environs and the strange mores of the Hollywood-New York movie circuit; that Orson Bean is an extremely adept comedian, Martin Gabel a suave and skilled farceur, Walter Matthau an accomplished sophisticate and Jayne Mansfield a capable commedienne with the biggest bust since "The Islands of Goats."

Lot of Devils

But to be specific, I thought there was no reason why The Devil (Gee, we've had a lot of devils around lately) should pick on Orson Bean in the first place. And there appeared to be an overwhelming amount of bad-taste comedy going around. Look, I'm a big boy, long pants and everything, but I get embarrassed at an endless scene of a girl trying to wrestle a young man into a bedroom. There are many remarks that didn't seem to me to justify their head-on suggestiveness and, anyway, isn't the whole original Marilyn Monroe joke running a little thin?

This is my personal feeling about "Rock." My professional opinion, on the other hand, is that it will probably attract sufficient audiences who like this kind of thing to make it go. This will depend to a degree on whether later customers recognize the fact that Irving La Salle is really somebody with a highly similar name, or that Harry Kaye is the dead ringer for the actual head of a Hollywood studio, or that a simple breakfast at the Beverly Hills hotel is the sacred ritual the author makes it.

I have the further feeling that success has come too easily to George (Rock) Axelrod, and that with more careful construction he may yet give us a powerful, first-class comedy.

Daily Mirror

October 14, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Rock Hunter' Has Laughs, Good Cast

• Comedy is well-conceived but is sliced too thin to be solid success.

George Axelrod has popped up with a swell idea in "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?"—and sliced it too thin to be a solid success at the Belasco Theatre. As thin as the ham in a 10-cent sandwich. He is currently kidding Hollywood, and that takes a lot of doing. It's been done before, and better too.

A devilish agent latches onto a young fan-mag writer, and grants his every wish for a price—10 percent of his soul per wish. He acquires a million bucks, a blonde star, an Oscar, etc., and escapes his diabolical master's clutches in the nick of time.

THOUGH PRODUCER Jule Styne bills the new arrival as a new comedy, it's really a fantasy based on the Faust legend. As is "Damn Yankees," which packs more laughs, has more girls, swell music and Gwen Verdon yet. In other words, more for your money.

Jayne Mansfield, of the amazingly curvaceous figure and blonde hair, contributes a hilarious impersonation of a dizzy starlet. Orson Bean, the deadpan mimic, etches a most amusing picture of Orson Bean as a movie periodic Boswell. Walter Matthau is ingratiating as a cynical "playwrote," who parlays a single poetic drama into an inexhaustible goldmine.

Harry Clark has some devastating effective moments as a film magnate who wants to be told in a few words what scenarios are about. Martin Gabel is a real smoothie as the Satanic 90 percenter. William Thourlby takes some bone-breaking falls as a gridiron mastodon with a one-track mind. And Carol Grace is good as a not-overly-bright secretary.

OLIVER SMITH has designed eye-filling sets, while Jane Derby has used a shoe horn to slip sexy Miss Mansfield into slinky costumes calculated to fascinate the masculine eye.

As for author Axelrod, he has staged "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" at a pace that gets a lot of mileage on a little gas. The fantastical comedy boasts a goodly quota of laugh wallops to compensate for its cliches. But, after all, what is there new to say about Hollywood?

"The Carefree Tree"

The New York Times

October 12, 1955

Theatre: Legendary Chinoiserie

'The Carefree Tree' Opens at Phoenix

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"THE Carefree Tree," which was acted at the Phoenix last evening, is a charming play that needs a superb performance.

Aldyth Morris wrote it in the Chinese manner. It is a romantic tale of war and empresses, told with simplicity, but also with style. For the Chinese theatre is the most sophisticated in the world—a blend of music, pantomime, singing and declamation. Anything realistic that turns up amid the formalism of a Chinese performance is likely to be an accident, or a flaw in the acting.

•

If "The Carefree Tree" could be performed in English by a good Chinese troupe, it would be a thing of complete delight. It is the story of a young South Chinese soldier married to the daughter of the Northern Empress Dowager. The old Empress has killed his father and three of his brothers. She does not know that her grandson is also the grandson of the Empress of the South.

"The Carefree Tree" is a romantic legend that illustrates traditional Chinese morality. In this instance, the author shows how a chain of hate can be broken by an act of love. Without style, the story would be naïve. Told with style in the sophisticated Chinese manner, it should be pure art, like the ornate figures that are shown in simple attitudes on Chinese porcelains.

•

Since the Phoenix Theatre has gone to a lot of trouble to find a beautiful and unhackneyed drama, one does not wish to be unappreciative. And there are several things in the production that are admirable. Jack Landau, who is designer as well as director, has provided an enchanting physical production, composed of platforms, Chinese lattice, a regal circle and other celestial bits.

As lighted by Klaus Holm, who can transmute the brick wall backstage into a glowing sky and also knows how to light an empress, the production has a lot of magic. Alvin Colt's costumes are not uniformly distinguished, but he, too, knows how to dress royalty and warlords.

And the performance has its dramatic moments, particularly in the second act. That is the part of the tale that is dominated by two empresses, played by Blanche Yurka and Edith Meiser. It is the nature of empresses to be creatures of form and ceremony, which, in turn, are the genius of Chinese drama. In the acting of Miss Yurka and Miss Meiser, the style of the parts and the style of the genre coincide. "The Carefree Tree" is dramatically alive in the scenes dominated by the royal women.

Janice Rule makes a lovely princess. Farley Granger is a disarming American youth as her husband. Larry Gates has a winning manner in the part of a narrator, who doubles amusingly as the Empress Dowager's secretary. But pleasant realism in the American tradition leaves "The Carefree Tree" in a wilting condition. The nervous, jumping ballet of the bandits is no substitute for the deliberate, high-style of Peking opera.

•

Americans find Chinese actors ridiculous in Western dramas, like a "Hamlet" once endured by this reporter in Chungking during the war. But the opposite is also true. Realistic American actors can hardly avoid giving lame and limp performances in a Chinese drama. "The Carefree Tree" is better than Peking opera in one respect: it tells its story in two hours rather than in a week. But even in a length that is manageable in our theatre, it needs the dash, fluidity, cohesion, ferocity, and magnificence of Chinese acting. The actors have to believe that they are gods, entirely removed from the common scene.

"THE CAREFREE TREE"

Play by Aldyth Morris; staged and designed by Jack Landau; costumes by Alvin Colt; incidental music by Aaron Avshalomov; lighting by Klaus Holm; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, October 11, 1955. The cast:

Feng Chu...Frederic Warriner
Storyman.....Larry Gates
Actorman.....Farley Granger
Propertyman.....Jerry Stiller
Mu Yi.....Farley Granger
Princess.....Janice Rule
Her Maid.....Dee Victor
An Old Man....Mitchell Agruss
A Soldier.....Kelton Garwood
Another Soldier...Sorrell Booke
Empress Dowager..Blanche Yurka
Her Chancellor.....Chuan
The Green Bandit...David Gold
The Purple Bandit...Alvin Alley
A Wolf.....Albert Corbin
Widow Yang.....Edith Meiser
Widows Yang...Sylvia Short, Olga Bielinska, Frances Sternhagen and Nancy Baker
Sixth Son.....Thayer David
Fifth Son.....Michael Higgins
Feng Nan.....Sada Thompson

New York Post

October 12, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Chinese Fantasy About a War

The enterprising and ever-hopeful Phoenix Theater began its third season last night with Aldyth Morris' "The Carefree Tree," which is a fantasy, and fantasies are notoriously difficult to bring off. Furthermore, it's one of those imitation Chinese fantasies, and they present additional complications. There is a certain mild charm in the new play, and it at least improves noticeably in the second half, but my uncomfortable impression is that dramatic tedium dominates this latest offering of the ambitious downtown theatrical organization.

Being a pseudo-Chinese fantasy, "The Carefree Tree," of course, has a comic property man, who hands swords or babies or sticks indicating horses to the actors. It encourages characters to introduce themselves to the audience, puts a great store on slightly arch informality, and is strong on quaintness. Naturally, too, the dialogue goes in for such phrases as "the fiery ball of the sun," and references to the heroine's "lily-like hands." As a comedy called "The Yellow Jacket" once proved, this sort of thing can be delightful, but not inevitably.

An Improvement

In this case, I'm afraid it results far more in boredom than in enchantment. In the first of the two acts, it seemed that the author was bent entirely on achieving quaintness and charm, and, when efforts to accomplish any such dangerous feat fail, they become heavy-handed and coy to an alarming degree. Fortunately, "The Carefree Tree" turns slightly in the direction of drama for its concluding act, and matters thereupon improve considerably, but the improvement doesn't come in time or prove impressive enough to overcome the first deadly effect.

The story, it is high time to tell you, has to do with a kind of Oriental Romeo and Juliet case, the leaders of the brawling Montagues and Capulets being two imperial Chinese ladies. There is a war between the north of China and the south, but it turns out that the young man the Dowager Empress' daughter has married is actually the son of the woman who is at the head of the invading Southerners. In the end, despite the temptations to be belligerent, peace triumphs, and the warlike old ladies are united in happiness over a grandchild.

Two Philosophers

In the second act, the dramatist is clearly in earnest about presenting a parable concerning the superiority of peace and love over war and hatred, but she also embarks on a side issue. Before the hero had gone off to battle, captivity and marriage with the Empress' daughter, he had been married to another girl, and there is a philosopher who teaches the deserted woman that she can find happiness in resignation. There is also a vendor of charms who has a message about love and kindness. I didn't think it was altogether helpful.

Nor did the acting strike me as more than passable. Janice Rule brings a pleasant attractiveness to the role of the heroine, and I liked Thayer David in his brief appearance as a fellow who loves war. Blanche Yurka is the formidable Empress, Edith Meiser is the mother from the south, Larry Gates is present as both the man who presides over the show and a sinister court adviser, and Farley Granger, making his local non-movie debut, is the hero. "The Carefree Tree" has its moments, but it doesn't supply a very stimulating evening in the theater.

Journal American

October 12, 1955

Fine Cast Trapped With Tired Theme

Farley Granger Makes His Bow In Play Belaboring Subject of War

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE PHOENIX THEATRE, in its current program, goes to some pains to explain the bold and experimental nature of the things they have been doing in their pleasant premises at 2d ave. at 12th st., during the past three seasons. I will go along with this; at least one of their efforts, "The Golden Apple," paid off in cabbage and accolade, and while some of their other endeavors didn't happen to hit a personal nerve I'll admit they deserved a big "T" for try.

But I think they might have devoted the space in the program last night to a more specific message. I wish they'd explain what "The Carefree Tree" is trying to prove. Oh, sure, I know this is highly stylized Chinese-type drama, and I'm sure it's loaded with social significance, but my friends and I are tired of having it hurled at us in the most oblique manner possible.

Capable Actors

Don't most of us, in this disturbed year of our Lord, agree to the fact that War is regrettable? So then why is it necessary to kick this belabored subject around for another two hours, employing any number of capable actors—all made up with slanted eyebrows—and bearing names like Mu Yi, Feng Nan, the Purple Bandit, Feng Chu, etc.?

When the final curtain falls and the Far Eastern dust has settled the whole hassle might have taken place in Passaic, in a language I understand—and wouldn't it have more impact?

This is one of the times when a reviewer could beat his brains out trying to solve the subtleties of the author's intentions. I don't believe "The Carefree Tree" deserves or, for that matter, could survive such analysis. Without meaning to be flippant I think this is a tired and tenuous idea, and I won't go for it just because it's tied up in pigtails.

Full Credit

On the other hand I will give full credit to the players involved—it's a truly exceptional cast to be trapped in such shenanigans. Farley Granger, a fugitive from Hollywood, herein makes his bow to 2d ave., and while he is thoroughly acceptable he should be thankful this was not the vehicle to bring him to Broadway.

Other meritorious performances were registered by such big timers as Larry Gates, Edith Meiser, Blanche Yurka, Janice Rule, Frederic Warriner, and Michael Higgins.

The Phoenix has established itself in the theatrical life of New York, but wouldn't it be well advised to come off that pink cloud?

Daily Mirror
October 12, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'The Carefree Tree' Appeals to the Eye

• Clever lighting, drapes and imagination enhance play in the Chinese tradition.

Back in 1913, George Hazelton and J. H. Benrimo penned a play, told in the terms of the Chinese Theatre, called "The Yellow Jacket." It was a picturesque piece, featuring a dead-pan property man who made mountains and valleys appear with a handful of conventional props.

The Hazelton-Benrimo script has since been revived, here and there, and has usually been good for laughs. No one takes the story seriously any more, but, rather, enjoys the charade as a stage novelty. And, of its kind, it's still the best. Unfortunately, however, it impels others to imitate its Oriental quaintness.

FOR INSTANCE, Aldyth Morris recently got around to retelling the story of Romeo and Juliet, after the fashion of the fabulous "Yellow Jacket." With a happy ending, yet, and a tribute to the beauties of peace. It seems that the nasty old Dowager Empress of North China did away with several members of the family of a Southern rival.

It looked like the feud would go on till these Cathayan Montagus and Capulets had exterminated one another. Then the dour dowager's daughter married her enemy's son. They had an heir, whose doting grandmothers turned thumbs down on future wars, and named him their successor to unite the kingdoms.

There is really no literary or poetic quality to the Morris play, which merely serves director-designer Jack Landau and costumer Alvin Colt with a springboard for a simple and colorful production, using a bare stage, a few set pieces and billowy drapes to form a series of eye-filling pictures. These are most effectively lit by Klaus Holm.

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FARLEY GRANGER, of the films, and Janice Rule are attractive as the Morris equivalents of Shakespeare's Verona romantics. Edith Meiser and Blanche Yurka are quite right as the parents who learn that love is better than war. Frederic Warriner, Larry Gates and Jerry Stiller are helpful in other roles.

"The Carefree Tree," as the Morris fantasy is called, is something to see, if not very much to hear. When T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton decided to present it at their Phoenix Theatre for a limited engagement, they must have been impressed by its eye rather than its ear-appeal.

The new arrival does prove one thing: that imagination and skill can obviate the necessity for a lot of costly sets. A bare stage, clever lighting, a few drapes and a minimum of props can serve admirably as the background for a theatre piece. Hambleton and Houghton first proved this last season with a rousing revival of John Webster's rip-roaring melodrama, "The White Devil."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 12, 1955

THEATER

'The Carefree Tree'

By WALTER F. KERR

"THE CAREFREE TREE," which paddled its way down the aisles of the Phoenix Tuesday night, is one of those Oriental reconstructions in which a property man sits crosslegged at the side of the stage, mends the broken stage pottery while the action is going forward and rises occasionally to slip a pillow beneath the knees of a supplicating heroine.

After one thunderous blackout in the dramatic action last night, this amiable little property man lit a match, poked at the proscenium, and disappeared through some multicolored curtains. What I want to know is this: was that a fourteenth century Chinese match meant to symbolize some flaming development in the narrative, or was that a twentieth century American match meant to help the poor fellow find his way off stage?

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I don't ask this question lightly. It seems to me, in all seriousness, that it is the central problem confronting Miss Aldyth Morris' new play. The stylized piece is most carefully fashioned to say a few gentle words about the desirability of peace in the world, but to say it in the mannered conceits and ritualistic gestures of Chinese folk-art.

Curling dragons crawl down light blue portals. A red bird tied to the property man's pole darts in and out of a delicate conversation. A few blossoms fall from a trellis, dewdrops are hurled from a sturdy portico, a procession of chairs becomes a handy bridge, and a gigantic rippling sword is held poised over a quite imaginary infant. The characters speak in the rich, archaic rhythms of Western Union telegrams, casting articles and verbs where the dewdrops have gone, and when it is time for them to take leave of one another they face directly front and raise their hands high.

Every bit of this, it must be said, is simply, solemnly, and tastefully managed. Jack Landau's skeletonized designs—sometimes only a few colored ropes shaped into enchanting tents—are perfectly evocative. Alvin Colt's costumes are a series of rustling delights. Mr. Landau's stage direction is precise and graceful.

And the company is unmistakably attractive: as a smiling princess, Janice Rule is a veritable China doll; as her "common southern soldier" of a husband, Farley Granger is sturdy, straightforward, and very well-spoken. Larry Gates is a soothing story teller, Blanche Yurka a dowager queen worthy of her long golden fingernails, and Edith Meiser is pleasantly appealing as she worries about starting a war on a day when the skies are so blue. Whatever director and actors can honestly do has been honestly done for "The Carefree Tree."

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But what, after all, is "The Carefree Tree?" Since it is not a translation of something authentically alien, remote, and native to some soil or other, it cannot really interest us as a valid curio, as a charming relic of an actual culture.

And as a new play, forcibly cast into a self-conscious mold, it can only be an artifice. Whether or not the traditional Oriental methods of writing a play seem to you good methods—in the present instance, I'm afraid you'll feel that one half of the evening is exposition and the other half irrelevant—they aren't especially good methods for convincing a western audience that the materials are urgent and the point of view plausible.

The inevitable happens. The tricks turn in on themselves, the play becomes coyly aware of its own little gimmicks, and the first thing you know the players are making intramural jokes. Mr. Gates, as the storyteller, is suddenly hustled into a false beard when another character misses his cue. An actor who has been handed a stick bearing four white tassels to represent his horse is obviously unhappy about the imposture. A fellow who has been standing between two whirling flags—these constitute, of course, a mighty wind—becomes irritated with all the bustle and brushes them waspishly aside. In the end, the devices suggest nothing but themselves, not even to the characters who must live with them. The project is, from beginning to end, synthetic.

As it happens, this is the second anti-war play we've had in the last few weeks. But this one is just a pussy at the gates.